

The Cotton mouth jumpstarts blues at Club West Tuesday

By DWIGHT LOOP

For most blues musicians, playing the blues is their life. Once they start, they never look back.

Major rock bands like the Rolling Stones and the Beatles, as well as guitarists Eric Clapton and the late Stevie Ray Vaughn all recognized the importance of traditional blues in their music.

For James Cotton, whose band will be performing at Club West at 9:30 p.m. Tuesday, the blues is what it's always been about.

Born in Tunica, Miss. in 1935, Cotton's life is a classic tale of an American blues musician.

He started "fooling around" with the harmonica by the time he was five.

His mother played the harmonica, making train sounds or hen sounds. That was what Cotton thought the instrument was for and he mimicked these sounds.

But then he heard harmonica player Sonny Boy Williamson on KFFA's *King Biscuit Time* radio show out of Helena, Ark.

Four years later, he would not only meet Williamson, but would travel with him for the next six.

Then it was off to West Memphis, Tenn. for Cotton as he formed his own band, James Cotton and His Rhythm Playmates.

Sam Phillips of the now legendary Sun Records heard him on the radio and immediately signed him up for two recordings, *Straighten Up Baby* and *Cotton Crop Blues*.

Stints with Howlin' Wolf followed, but he seemed to be reaching a career impasse in 1954.

Until he met one of the most famous blues masters.

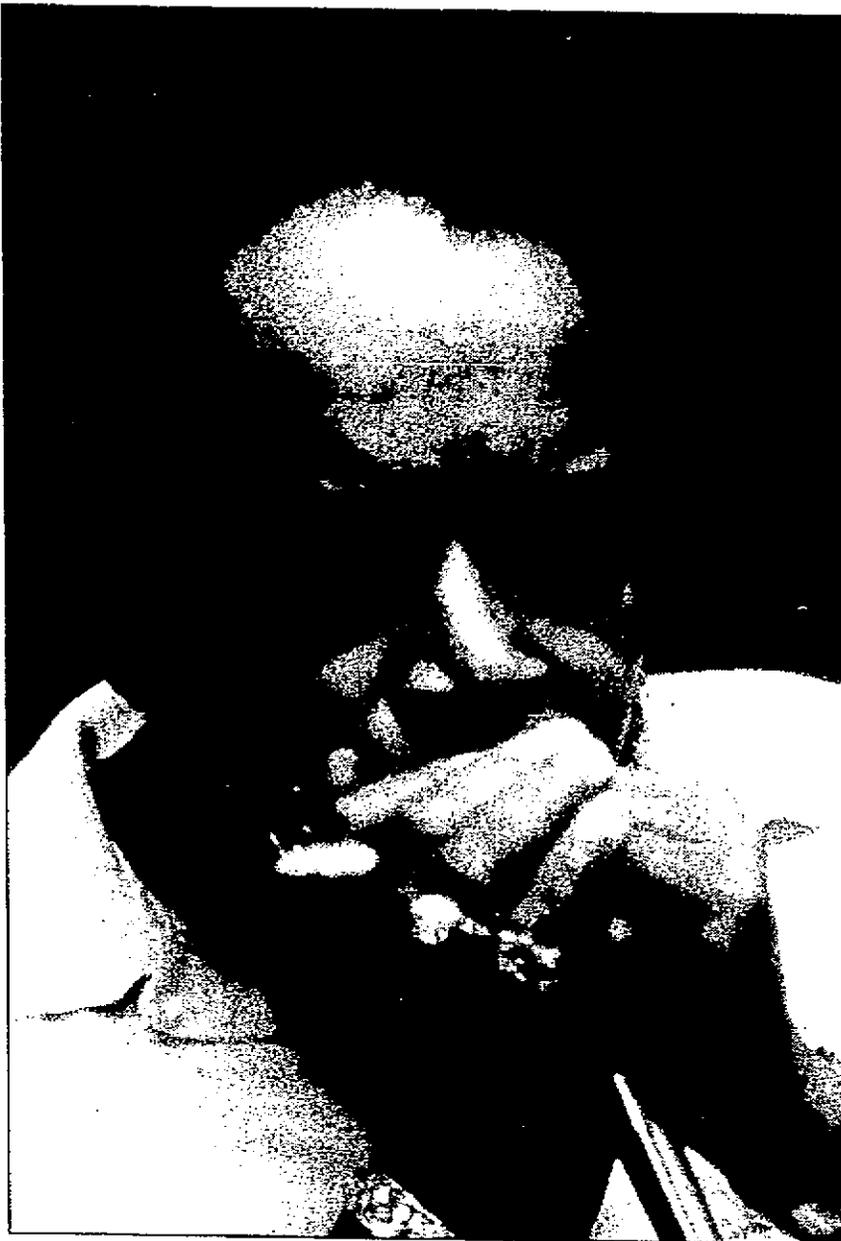
Muddy Waters, based in Chicago, was looking for a harmonica player, and the rest is history.

Cotton stayed with Waters for 12 years, perfecting his own style of playing, and is on all of Waters' famous Chess Records from 1954 to 1966.

Cotton's style developed intensity.

He's been known to blow the keys right out of the harmonica, one time blowing the top right off.

Waters had a more laid-back style. Cotton's aggressive and emotional performances with his band quickly became a standard for Chicago-style blues.



Blues man James Cotton will be at Club West 9:30 Tuesday

In 1966, Cotton left Muddy's band and ventured out on his own. It was a good move.

His influence on rock n' roll in the '60s and '70s was very pronounced.

He taught Paul Butterfield, Peter Wolf of the J. Geils Band and influenced such notables as Mike Bloomfield, Steve Miller and Bonnie Raitt.

Janis Joplin invited him to tour with her band.

Eventually, he went on to record and tour with Miller and Johnny Winter in the late '70s.

Cotton's '80s style has changed. He's not the wild player he was, preferring to tone down his personal antics. However, his band more than makes up for it.

Featuring drummer Willie Smith, bassist Calvin Jones, piano wizard Pinetop Perkins and guitarists Matt Murphy and Luther Tucker, Cotton's group jumpstarts the blues like few others.

Cotton has had three Grammy nominations for best

traditional blues album. His latest release is *Mighty Long Time*, on Antone's Records.

The album features classic blues hits by Sonny Boy Williamson, Percy Mayfield, Howlin' Wolf, Willie Dixon and T-Bone Walker.

Muddy Waters' last great rhythm section plays on it along with a stable of credible blues guitarists including Wayne Bennett, Hubert Sumlin and Derek O'Brien.

Opening the show will be Albuquerque blues pianist Larry Friedman of the Blues Kings.

CLOSE-UP

Who: James Cotton
 What: Blues
 When: 9:30 p.m. Tuesday
 Where: Club West
 Tickets: \$12 advance; \$15 door

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